

Staff Report – Agenda Items 6B and 6C

General Plan and Environmental Impact Report and Establishment of a Cultural Preserve subunit for Topanga State Park

I. DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION

California State Parks recommends that the State Park and Recreation Commission (Commission) adopt the proposed resolution to approve the Preliminary General Plan/Final Environmental Impact Report (GP/FEIR) for Topanga State Park (the park). A separate resolution to establish a 158-acre cultural preserve subunit named Topanga Cultural Preserve is also submitted for consideration by the Commission.

II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Topanga State Park is located in the Santa Monica Mountains of Los Angeles County. Opened to the public in 1973 and operated by California State Parks, the park is located within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA), a nationally significant, multi-jurisdictional public land management area.

Roughly 8,960 acres of the 11,525 acre Topanga State Park are within the City of Los Angeles. The balance of the park lies in unincorporated Los Angeles County, bordered by the cities of Malibu, Santa Monica, and Calabasas, and the communities of Topanga, Pacific Palisades, Brentwood, Encino, Tarzana, and Woodland Hills.

Topanga State Park is a significant place of scenic wildlands within a fragmented and ever-encroaching urban setting. Although it is in the middle of the most heavily populated area of California, the park maintains a sense of wholeness and integrity. It is a landscape shaped by its underlying natural history and by its rich and diverse cultural history. Some of the earliest known areas of human habitation in California were established in this area thousands of years ago.

This general plan is the first tier of a tiered general plan/environmental impact report for Topanga State Park which will guide the management and development of this state park for public use and resource protection for the next 20-plus years. The plan establishes goals and guidelines to assist in the daily and long term management of the park that ensure its natural and cultural resources are protected, while allowing for a variety of appropriate recreational opportunities. Projects proposed by this plan will require follow-up California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) compliance in the form of second tier evaluations of the potential impacts of specific projects.

III. PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTIONS

In 1977, the Commission approved a General Development Plan (GDP) for Topanga State Park. That document was amended in 1978 by the Commission to delete from the GDP the provisions for a “Heritage Farm” development that had been proposed for the Rustic Canyon area.

Subsequent to the above Commission actions, California State Parks acquired additional lands for the park, including the 1,659 acres known as the Lower Topanga Canyon area, which is adjacent to the park’s southwest boundary. This acquisition, along with the diminished applicability of the 1977 General Development Plan, contributed to the need to create an updated, comprehensive general plan for Topanga State Park.

IV. PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS

The general plan process for Topanga State Park began in September 2009, with a public scoping meeting. Approximately sixty people attended this first public meeting. Subsequent to the scoping meeting and the eight focus group meetings that followed, two additional public meetings took place during July 2010 and June 2011.

Other techniques employed to generate public involvement included:

- Establishing a website that documented the general plan process and allowed posting of pertinent planning information.
- Having comment cards available at all the public meetings.
- Conducting random surveys of meeting participants to seek feedback on the meeting they had attended.
- Sending out over two hundred mailings/notices of the second meeting.
- Conducted a survey of park docents relating to visitor use.

Letters, emails, and development proposals trickled in throughout the process, usually expressing a particular interest. All comments were fully vetted and considered, ensuring the planning process reflected an informed community and state-wide based planning process.

State Parks circulated the Preliminary General Plan/Draft EIR for a 45-day review period beginning on December 8, 2011 and ending on January 23, 2012.

V. HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

Between 1964 and 1973, organizations such as the Santa Monica Mountains Regional Park Association, Friends of the Santa Monica Mountains State Park, and other interested groups lobbied the State of California to acquire undeveloped lands in the Santa Monica Mountains for the purposes of preserving open space and creating a state park. The initial 7,200 acres of Topanga State Park opened to the public on July 1, 1973. The park currently totals 11,525 acres.

VI. ISSUES AND ANALYSIS

There are three overlapping issues that have received attention during the planning and public review periods. The following issues involve the determination of appropriate land uses and achieving the correct balance of natural resource preservation, cultural and historic resource protection, and visitor use.

ISSUE #1: The future of the Lower Topanga Canyon area, regarding the fundamental relationship between the unquestionably rare opportunity to restore the lagoon/creek with the existing and desired land uses, including the possible relocation/removal of existing businesses and the possible relocation/removal of the National Register of Historic Places-eligible historic Topanga Ranch Motel, which is situated atop highway construction fill covering a Native California Indian village archeological site.

Analysis: A key component of a successful general plan is to establish a bold vision which will serve to guide the development of the park for many years to come. A tremendous opportunity exists to restore the lagoon at Lower Topanga. During the planning process one public meeting participant noted that, "(we have) such a rare and precious opportunity here (in the Lower Topanga Canyon area) to do something special, it would be a shame to waste it on something that could be done anywhere, anytime."

As such, the Topanga State Park General Plan embraces the concept of restoration and renewal of the natural landscape at Topanga Creek and Lagoon from shore to canyon, through a balanced approach of lagoon/creek hydrological science and design with the interpretation and protection of the known Native California Indian resources. This concept has the potential to integrate modern land management techniques and traditional sustainability practices while providing interpretive and educational opportunities and enhanced public access to the Lower Topanga Canyon area.

The general plan does not propose the immediate removal of the structures associated with the historic Topanga Ranch Motel. However, the possibility of adaptive re-use and/or alteration or even removal of these structures will depend on the ultimate scope of the proposed lagoon restoration.

The plan allows for the existing businesses to be relocated and converted into concession opportunities (some are now tenants and not concessions) in more strategic locations in order to work in harmony with the protection of the creek's water quality and the overall creek/lagoon restoration efforts.

The goals and guidelines for the Lower Topanga and Lagoon zones outlined in the general plan allow for the transformation of the Lower Topanga Canyon area into a "visual and natural gateway" for the park, creating a wonderful "sense of arrival" for park visitors and for daily commuters who use both Pacific Coast Highway and Topanga Canyon Boulevard.

This "gateway" recommendation does not necessitate the development of new buildings such as a traditional Visitor Center complex; the general plan recommends that the entire Lower Topanga Zone become a "natural gateway" with strategically located new development being secondary to the natural and cultural resources.

Finally, this bold vision will help guide and inspire California State Parks' current and future collaborative efforts with the various interested partner agencies that have a stake in this transformation. These include the Los Angeles County Department of Beaches and Harbors, which operates the beach at the mouth of Topanga Creek, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), which owns and maintains the existing bridge over Topanga Creek/Lagoon, and the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, advocates of the protection and re-establishment of the creek's endangered California steelhead trout and tidewater goby population.

ISSUE #2: Trails comprise the major recreational use at Topanga State Park and with the park's vast acres of open space situated so close to an urban setting, the popularity of mountain biking is increasing, which raises the potential for trail conflicts amongst hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians.

Analysis: Specific trail use designation is not part of this plan because the intent of the general planning process is to establish the park's long range purpose and vision. With the establishment of a bold park vision, specific park policies such as trail use designations and regulations will be determined with the completion of an on-going interagency regional Trail Management Process (TMP). The TMP, being led by the National Parks Service with the participation of California State Parks and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, is working to create an overall direction for the development of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) trail network. This network, which includes Topanga State Park, encompasses approximately 800 miles of trails, dirt roads, and paved roads.

Upon completion of the TMP, the designation of trail use for the regional trails system will be determined, which in turn will influence State Parks' evaluation and final implementation

of trail designations within Topanga State Park.

However, the Topanga State Park General Plan does denote “Trail Corridors” within the proposed management zones. These corridors may be an existing trail or only a conceptual trail route that illustrates the need to connect two points of interest or management zones in the park. General routes are illustrated in the plan, but exact trail routes will only be determined once additional analysis has been conducted of elements such as topography and natural/cultural resources. Details of future trail corridors will be established during the development the Santa Monica Mountains Trail Management Plan (encompassing Topanga State Park).

ISSUE #3: During the planning process, Native California Indian peoples expressed concerns regarding the establishment of the proposed 158-acre cultural preserve in the park’s Trippet Ranch Zone. The proposed Topanga Cultural Preserve, near Trippet Ranch, includes the greatest concentration of archaeological sites in the park: 13 recorded sites, nine Native California Indian and four historic. One site in this area, “LAN-1,” has been radiocarbon dated to at least 6,080 years before present. LAN-1 serves as the archaeological “type site” for the Topanga culture, which means the site contains archaeological artifacts and features that are seen as the model for this particular society. Today’s Chumash and Tongva peoples consider this area sacred and special.

It was expressed that the establishment of a cultural preserve would call attention to the area and identify specific archaeological sites in the park, making them more vulnerable to disturbance. Concerns were also expressed that improvements in the Lower Topanga Zone would result in impacts to the documented sacred sites located there.

Analysis: The California Native American Heritage Commission provided the general planning team with a list of interested groups and individuals. The planning team consulted with the Barbareño Chumash, Gabrieleno/Tongva, and Ventureño Chumash tribes, and conducted meetings with representatives of the Gabrieleno/Tongva, Ventureño Chumash, and the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians both off site and at the park. California State Parks believes that the proposed cultural preserve area will be large enough in acreage (158 acres), with sufficient buffers around the known archaeological sites, that attention to specific sites will not be an issue. In addition, establishment of a cultural preserve provides the highest level of protection and affords an opportunity for the focused management of these precious cultural resources. Designation of the cultural preserve will also ensure that trails and other future improvements are kept well away from culturally sensitive areas through drafted goals and guidelines put forth in the plan. It was noted during the planning process that the best protection for the park’s cultural resources is through education and interpretation to heighten awareness of the importance of these resources.

As a result of these meetings and the consultation process, these Native California Indian groups support the cultural preserve proposal.

In conjunction with the establishment of the cultural preserve the Topanga State Park General Plan recommends establishment of an 18-acre Historic Zone adjacent to the proposed cultural preserve. While “historic zone” is not a statutorily defined park classification, designation of such a zone would serve as a management tool to provide enhanced protection for the cultural resources in this area in harmony with the adjacent cultural preserve.

The proposed Historic Zone includes the historic core of Trippet Ranch – the former Rancho Las Lomas Celestiales, “The Ranch of the Heavenly Hills.” This ranch is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as an example of the early 20th Century “Gen-

tleman's Ranches" of the Santa Monica Mountains. Gentlemen Ranchers were upper middle class professionals who, between 1917 and 1966, sought retreat from their busy schedules in these rustic mountain hideaways.

The Topanga State Park General Plan recommends the creation of a cultural and archeological interpretive center within one of the historic Trippet Ranch structures to tell the story of the early cultures of this region, further heightening the awareness for protection of these valuable cultural resources.

VII. LEGAL ISSUES

There are no known legal issues relating to the Commission's approval of the General Plan/EIR for Topanga State Park.

VIII. FISCAL IMPACT

There is no immediate fiscal impact as a result of adoption of the general plan.

Additional revenues and concession opportunities in this park are considered to be possible for the foreseeable future.

Attachments:

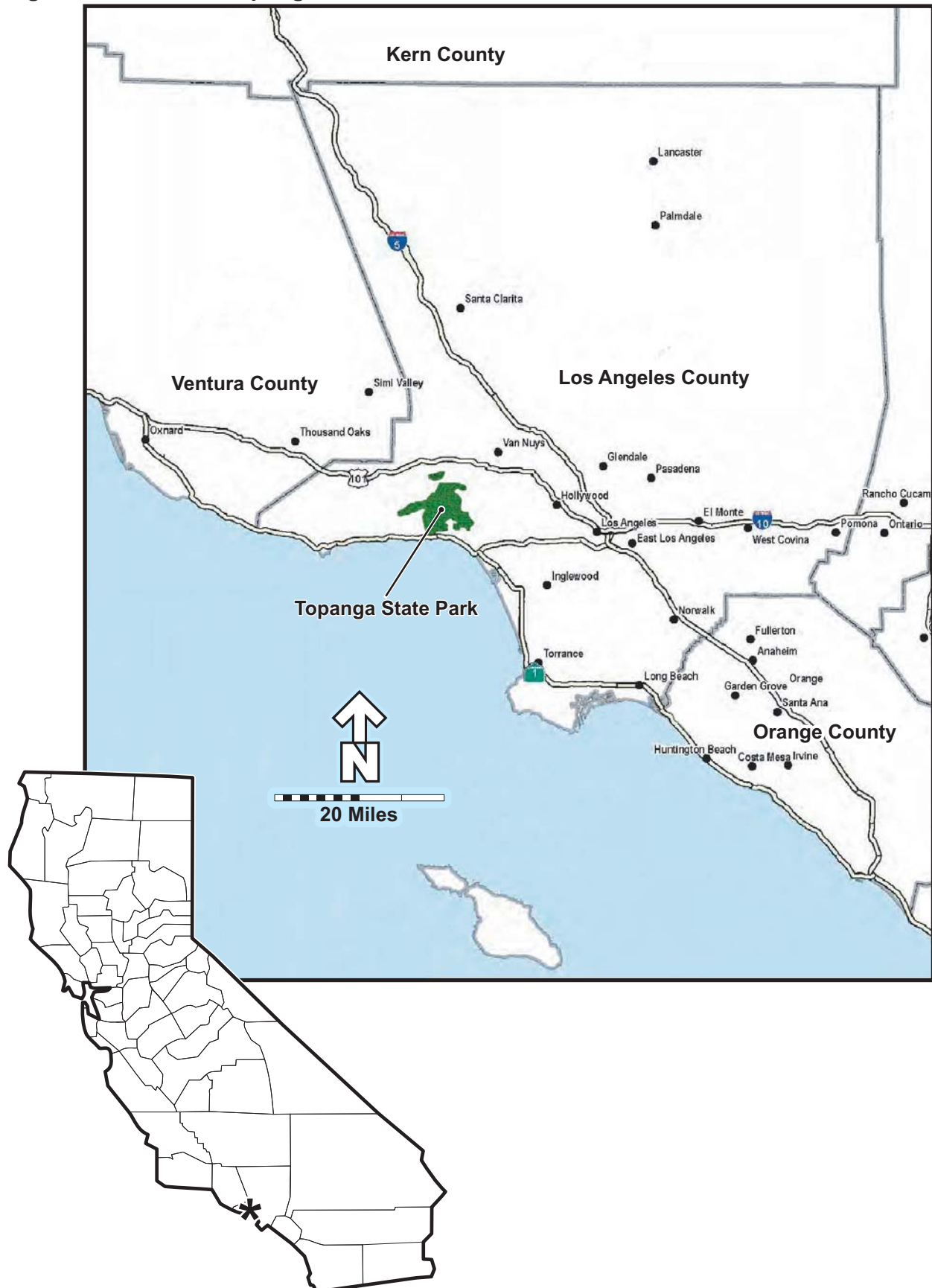
Figure 1: Topanga State Park Location Map

Figure 2: Preferred Plan with Management Zones

Exhibit A: Topanga Cultural Preserve document

Figure 3: Cultural Preserve Map showing boundaries of the preserve and historic zone

Figure 1: Location - Topanga State Park



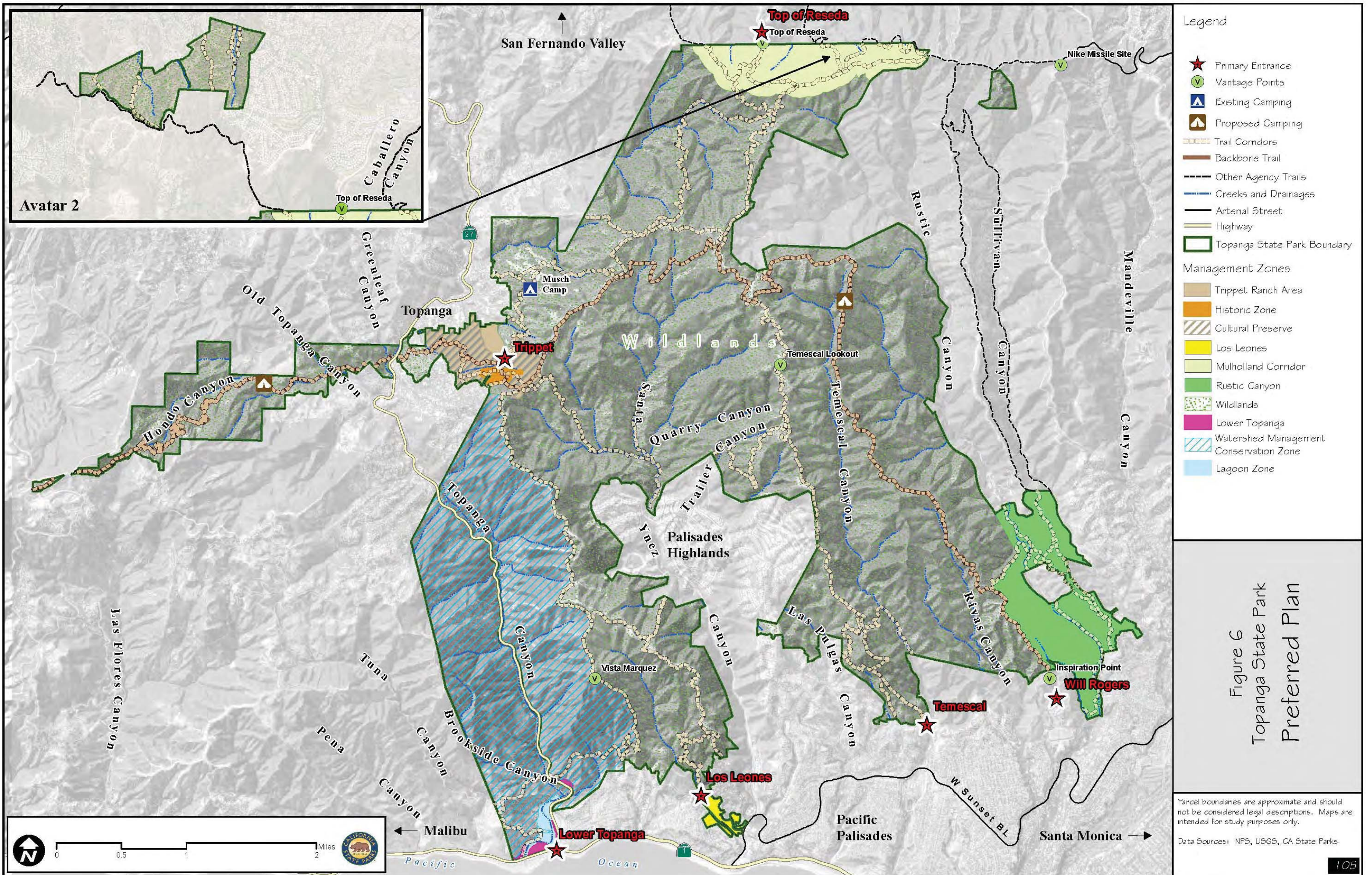


Exhibit A: Topanga Cultural Preserve

Cultural Preserve Definition from Public Resources Code Section 5019.74: Cultural Preserves consist of distinct non-marine areas of outstanding cultural interest established within the boundaries of other State Park System units for the purpose of protecting such features as sites, buildings, or zones which represent significant places or events in the flow of human experiences in California. Areas set aside as cultural preserves shall be large enough to provide for the effective management and interpretation of the resources. Within cultural preserves, complete integrity of the cultural resources shall be sought, and no structures or improvements that conflict with the integrity shall be permitted.

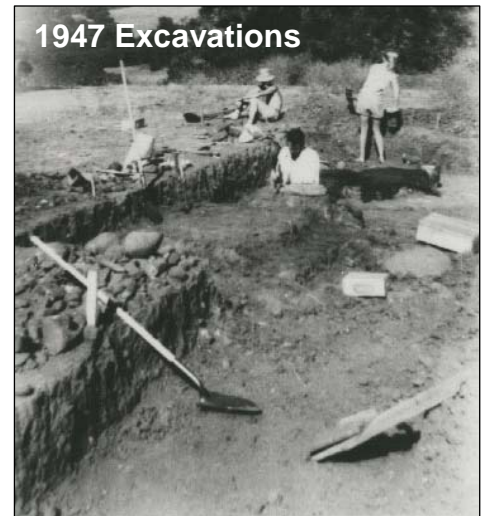
Proposed Size: 158 acres

Location in Topanga State Park: Trippet Ranch Zone

Archaeological Sites: 13 recorded sites (9 Native California Indian, 4 Historic) fall within the proposed preserve boundaries. This is the densest concentration of archaeological sites within the park.


Factors supporting creation of the Cultural Preserve:


- Area contains the largest (9.5-acre) known Native California Indian Village Site within Topanga State Park (CA-LAN-1), of which less than 1/8 of an acre has been excavated (<1½%).
- CA-LAN-1 has been radiocarbon dated to at least 6,080 years before present (BP) and contains artifacts and features that indicate it may be even older.
- The known archaeological sites contain early and significant artifact types such as cog-shaped stones, large stone tools, and grinding stone implements that could add to the understanding of some of the earliest peoples in California.
- The known archaeological sites show evidence of habitation during early, middle, and late periods of California Precontact History, which could help define the cultural history of this region and identify changes or similarities through time.
- Modern Chumash and Tongva peoples consider this area sacred and special to themselves and to their ancestors.
- CA-LAN-1 is the first site recorded in the State Trinomial System within Los Angeles Co.
- This area includes the locations of early, important archaeological excavations in the 1940s and 1950s by notable California archaeologists Robert F. Heizer (one of the founders and first director of the University of California Archaeological Survey), Adan E. Trenganza (who along with Heizer and others wrote and published the first book on field methods for California Archaeologists – based in part on work conducted at CA-LAN-1), and others.
- CA-LAN-1 and CA-LAN-2 are the sites where the “Topanga Archaeological Complex” was identified and defined and the “Millingstone Horizon” was documented and refined.
- 1977 Topanga State Park General Development Plan called for a cultural preserve here.
- Preserve status would help protect the sites and discourage unauthorized trails, vandalism, and other site disturbances that are currently damaging and destroying portions of some of the sites.





PROPOSED TRIPPET AREA CULTURAL PRESERVE AND PRIMARY HISTORIC ZONE BOUNDARIES

Legend

 SP Trails

 Cultural Preserve

 Historic Zone

 Park Boundaries

